

Shrilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari*: Patriarchy and The Intentional Evasion of Women

Siddharth Shankar Upadhyay, M.A. English, Jamia Millia Islamia, (NET Qualified)

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Abstract:

This paper outlines how Shrilal Shukla's representation of women in *Raag Darbari* is not a portrayal of his misogyny but that of a patriarchal society. He has not tried to filter his representation to make it true to what rural post-Independence India stands for. The portrayal of women in *Raag Darbari* reduces women to objects and tools of sexual pleasure but that shows the crude reality of post-Independence India. In the backdrop of rural politics, Shukla in *Raag Darbari* shows how women are placed in a socio-political scenario which is largely male-dominated. He offers a commentary on a society which uses women as a ladder to get to positions of power. The intentional evasion of women, the paper argues, from the narrative of *Raag Darbari* actually offers a true representation of the Post-Independence Indian society.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Women, *Raag Darbari*, Post-Independence Indian Literature, Non-representation

Introduction:

Raag Darbari, a work of popular fiction in Hindi literature, is regarded as one of the best satirical works on the sociopolitical ecology of rural India. The novel, delivered with black humour and irony, was possibly the first indictment of the democratic state, its bureaucratic set up, and the democratic institutions of the nation. It is set against the backdrop of an imagined village called Shivpalganj in Uttar Pradesh in the late 1960s. The novel is known for its stark realism. Gillian Wright, talking about Shukla in *Raag Darbari*, remarks, "His characters are recognizable in present-day India and likeable for all their faults, but it is in the author's devastating wit, power of observation and economy of style that the greatness of the book lies." (1993 p.112) Shrilal Shukla does a remarkable job of adding humor to incidents firmly rooted in the everyday but at the same time offer a biting satire of the sociopolitical system in the garb of a realistic portrayal of rural India. But realism comes with its own problems. The authorial voice gets merged with the narratorial voice and it becomes hard to locate if the ideas portrayed represent the author or the reality of the situation. In this context, there have been discussions about Shrilal Shukla being a misogynist for the

negative portrayal of women in *Raag Darbari*.

Shrilal Shukla's novel deals with politics of rural India. He does not write about women. His novel does not focus on the condition of women in post-Independence India. He does not pick sides. He is neither a feminist, nor a misogynist. He is just a realist. He portrays what he sees. The novel is like a mirror reflecting the reality of India in all its rawness. What we see in *Raag Darbari* is non-representation which reflects the non-representation of women in the matters of public importance in post-independence India. There were demarcated spaces in the society of that time, inside for the women and outside for men. This demarcation has been used for its symbolic value by many writers of the time including Rabindranath Tagore. Shukla, in this novel, deals with the public space, the outside. This non-representation that he chooses is the real representation.

This paper outlines how Shrilal Shukla's representation of women is not a portrayal of his misogyny but that of a patriarchal society. Not many papers written about *Raag Darbari* talk about the portrayal of women and the underlying patriarchy in the novel. A simple reason for this is the non-existence of any significant women characters in the novel. This intentional evasion, the paper argues, is a conscious decision on the part of Shrilal Shukla to show how the representation of women in the public sphere was also nonexistent in the post-

independence Indian society. This paper attempts to analyse how the male-dominant narrative of *Raag Darbari* reveals an underlying patriarchal system. Shukla has not tried to filter his representation to make it true to what rural post-Independence India stands for. The portrayal of women in *Raag Darbari* reduces women to objects and tools of sexual pleasure but that shows the crude reality of post-Independence India. In the backdrop of rural politics, Shukla in *Raag Darbari* shows how women are placed in a socio-political scenario which is largely male-dominated. He offers a commentary on a society which uses women as a ladder to get to positions of power.

Representation of Women in Post-Independence Indian Literature:

Indian literature written after independence has given the plight of Indian women additional dimensions. Many writers centered their works around women and their place in the society of that time. Kamala Markandaya, for example, in her book *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) depicts the true agony of a woman in rural India. Like Shukla, she also chooses a rural setting to show how the peasant woman is doubly marginalized due to her gender and class. This book paints a picture of rural Indian women who lack access to social, economic, and educational opportunities.

Contrary to the uneducated peasant woman that Markandaya represents, R.K. Narayan shows the plight of a talented and educated woman.

The female heroine Savitri in R. K. Narayan's 1938 book *The Dark Room* aims to shatter the idea of a content housewife. Narayan portrays the hardships of this middle-class housewife from South India sympathetically. She is imprisoned to the little space of an unhealthy relationship, which places strict obligations on her to be dutiful and submissive. She tries to leave the house, rebel and also kill herself but nothing comes as a solution to her problem. Thus, the novel does not try to offer a utopian ending, it rather realistically portrays how a woman is conditioned to be so physically and mentally dependent on her family that being independent and a rebel becomes impossible.

Mulk Raj Anand in his book *Gauri* (1976) does try to offer a resolution and a high point. The protagonist Gauri transforms from a hesitant and submissive woman to a strong woman who is aware of what she is worthy of. Anand successfully challenges yet another assumption about women being mute victims by giving the so-called perfect woman of society a voice and an opinion. But this turn in the novel is a turn away from realism and what actually happens. This speaking for self could not really be realized in a post-independence Indian society.

This list is not exhaustive. Many others portrayed women through different theoretical and thematic lenses. In this tradition, Shukla paves a different path for himself. Vanashree in her essay on Shrilal Shukla remarks, "The immense

range and originality of his works, difficult to replicate would render obtuse the views circulated by the fashionable elite publishing industry inclined to judge a writing by the public school of the author or the college from which one has graduated." (2012 p.59) Shukla does not try hard. He does not create a picture; he just captures one. There is no one significant woman character in *Raag Darbari*, yet it manages to portray how the post-independence Indian society is patriarchal at its core. Some incidents recorded in the novel that portray this are discussed in the next section.

Patriarchy in *Raag Darbari*:

Shrilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari* (1968) portrays a largely male dominated and patriarchal society. There is a strange absence of women voices and representation in Shukla's *Shivpalganj*. "Women only appear as passers-by or in bedtime fantasies." (Translator's Introduction) On being asked about the women representation in *Raag Darbari*, Shukla replied, "Society in *Raag Darbari* is a largely male-dominated society, and politics is still a male-dominated field..." (Ibid) Patriarchy in *Raag Darbari* operates at multiple levels. Women are mainly stock characters in the novel. They don't have a voice and are portrayed either as the responsibility of men or the objects of male sexual gaze.

Right at the time Rangnath enters the village, Shukla sarcastically remarks, "Sometime later he began to distinguish bundle-like objects in the twilight on both sides of the road. These were women

sitting in rows.”(p.7) This is a humorous representation of objectification of women. All significant and insignificant positions in the public sphere are occupied by men. Men are the heads of all the spheres of the society whether social, political or personal. Men are law makers; law breakers and law protectors. Women are just subordinates managing the household according to men's commands.

There is no mention of girls going to the college or school in the village. The only instance is that of the sub-inspector's daughter going to a convent school which provokes us to see patriarchy through the lens of rural-urban divide. But education is of little importance in the society portrayed in *Raag Darbari*. Shukla writes, “Bela was healthy, beautiful, proficient in housework, and educated enough to read the Ramayana and Maya-Manohar love stories” but despite all this she was only “fit to be loved for her body and her temperament.” (p.96) Rupanbabu “concentrated solely on her body, and not on the clothes upon it.” (p.96) Women are portrayed as objects for male gaze.

The vivid descriptions of women in *Raag Darbari* are mostly about their breasts, lips, curves and other physical features. Women belonging to the lower caste become more vulnerable to the male gaze. The upper caste male assumes all rights over a lower caste woman. Vaidyaji Maharaj when passing through Chamrahi would ‘hand out blessings in all directions, and note whose daughters

had begun to look more womanly in the last four months, which girl had come back, from her in-laws' house” (p.267)

Bodies of women become objects of consumption. Women are referred to as things and are offered to superior officials to satisfy their physical needs. At events like the village *Mela* groping and inappropriate touching are considered to be “real fun of the fair” (p.118). People visiting the *Mela* “lovingly laid [their] hands on the shoulders of several women, groped them to check the size and shape of their breasts, and all with such detachment that you'd think it was a man's bounden duty to do so while pushing his way through a crowd.” (p.120) Men assume the position of masters who can do whatever they wish without a check. This attitude gives rise to insensitivity towards women even in the case of heinous crimes like rape. Badri wrestler, the son of one of the most influential people of Shivapalgaanj, goes “to bail out a young man from a neighboring district who was facing charges of rape and assault.” Getting out of charges like rape is just a matter of some money. We only know of women in *Raag Darbari* through their relations with men. They are daughters, wives or lovers and if they fail to conform to the standards of any of these categories, then they are termed as whores. A simple case of robbery becomes a discussion of a woman's loose character. While giving his statement in Gayadin's robbery case Chhote wrestler says about Bela, “that she had immoral relations with Jognath.”

(p.227) Through this Shukla explains, "the old familiar pattern whereby it's already been proved a thousand times that no one in this world is a thief, but that, in fact, the man who is thought to be a thief is the lover of the wife or sister or daughter of the master of the house, who was summoned to bed them in the loneliness of night." (p.227) In this male dominated society even the crimes committed by men are the doings of so called characterless women. Even in the case of Bela and Badri, "people began remarking that Badri Wrestler had been trapped by Gayadin's girl" (p.296) and that "Bela was a girl of low morals." (p.165) Similarly, in the case of Pandit Radhelal, "whatever [his] status was, that of his beloved was absolutely clear. She had run away from her husband, therefore she was a bitch." (p.67)

Raag Darbari portrays the crude reality of post-independence Indian society where women are a burden for men who have to save up for their marriage and dowry. Shukla writes, "If one man takes a bribe, another says, 'What can he do, poor fellow? He's got a big family, he's got to pay for dowries.'" (p.34) The principal also talks about having to resort to wrong means because he has to "marry off four sisters." (p.193) Even if women have to get into the public sphere, they have to do so at the will and mercy of men. -Talking to Gayadin about Bela, Vaidyaji says, "I'll also get the girl involved in some social work. There's the Women's Board; I'll get

her on to that. She'll get a car, and a chaprassi to accompany her." (p.303)

There is no place for women in the politics of Shivpalganj. The narrative strategy employed by Shukla emphatically represents this reality. There is an uncanny absence of any spoken dialogues by women in the novel. This representation stands parallel to the reality where women do not have a voice especially in public matters. Shukla also uses local dialect for that rural Indian flavor. Language used by the characters in *Raag Darbari* is also a marker of a male dominated society. Idioms and curses in the local dialect also demean women. Abusing the opponents' mothers and sisters and telling them "which part of a woman's body [they] had been born from" (p.186) are the most used cuss words.

Shukla portrays the patriarchy through multiple ways and numerous narrative strategies. *Raag Darbari* stands true in its representation of the reality of post-independence India. In an essay published by Sahitya Akademi, Shrawan Kumar writes, "Shrilal Shukla is more revealing since he knows the rural life inside out and can deal with situations quite relentlessly." (Kumar 58) Shukla, by showing patriarchy in rural setting, also raises important questions about intersections of gender and class. Rural women are more subjugated owing to factors such as illiteracy. The nonchalant way in which patriarchy is represented in the novel is exactly how it was in post-

independence society, prevalent yet unnoticed.

Conclusion:

Raag Darbari has been called Dystopian fiction by many. It does not provide the same old romanticized version of the rural landscape and society rather goes deeper to expose what lies behind the romanticized media portrayals of the rural. As Anjaria rightly remarks “[Shukla] poignantly represents the extent to which the disillusionment of the era penetrates deeply into the Indian Psyche” (Anjaria 4795) Thus, Intentional Evasion of women from the narrative as a strategy works beautifully to penetrate those deeper layers of Post-Independence Indian Society. The non-representation actually works to offer a multi-dimensional portrayal of the stature of women in the society of that time. We see how women just become apparatuses in a political framework dominated by men. If art and literature should present solutions and hope for future or just portray the reality has been a topic of much heated contestation. If art should take up the responsibility to change the society has also been much debated. Shrilal Shukla takes up the challenge of representation and change by using dark comedy and satire as his weapons. These truth pills garbed in a humorous representation serve the purpose well. Shukla leaves us with a masterpiece, the raw and real rural manifesto of sorts but packed with crude mockery and satire. It offers us with incidents and characters which can still be seen in the society.

Shukla, with his powerful writing, inspires us to unlearn and rethink the conception of the romantic rural.

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